

# WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING IN PHILADELPHIA THEATERS

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, information obtained over the course of interviews with representatives of nine Philadelphia theater companies concerning their marketing efforts, and word-of-mouth marketing in particular, is analyzed in light of the findings of researchers of word-of-mouth marketing in the for-profit sector. These interviews demonstrate that each of the nine Philadelphia theater companies has been executing various word-of-mouth techniques with varying levels of expertise and consistency. However, not all these companies are tracking their efforts; this is a result of lack of time, lack of resources, and the intrusion of other priorities. In addition, the Philadelphia theater companies in this sampling do not have sufficient awareness of their brand. Most of the companies, even in comparison with the other local Philadelphia theater companies in this nine-company sample, simply are not as remarkable as they think they are. This surely has a negative impact on their ability to utilize word-of-mouth marketing.

Moving forward, some Philadelphia theaters may need to take into consideration what their competitors are doing and then redefine themselves to make themselves more remarkable. These organizations also need to be better educated on what word-of-mouth techniques are available to them, how they can

use them to their advantage, the benefits of tracking their efforts, and which tracking options would best fit their organization based on time and budgetary limitations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Word-of-mouth marketing is once again more popular than traditional advertising and marketing techniques. Attend almost any theatrical production in Philadelphia and during the curtain speech you will be asked to tell your friends about the production if you enjoyed it - in some cases, if you did not enjoy the production, you will be asked to tell your enemies! Managers of theater companies claim word-of-mouth is their best form of marketing. However, are these theater companies actively planning and implementing word-of-mouth techniques into their marketing strategies? If so, which techniques are they using and why? While they claim that word-of-mouth is their best form of marketing, are these results actually being tracked, or is this claim based on an educated guess? The answers to these questions will be explored throughout this paper. Before I analyze what I learned over the course of my interviews with theater professionals in Philadelphia, it is necessary first to review the literature on how word-of-mouth is being utilized across for-profit industries and to introduce my study sample in Philadelphia.

Word-of-mouth marketing can take on many different forms. The most fascinating, yet obvious form, is creating a product, production or service that is so remarkable that favorable word-of-mouth is an automatic response to



experiencing that product or service. In this case, the marketer barely needs to plan other word-of-mouth techniques when formulating a strategy composed of various marketing techniques, or, as I will refer to it, creating the “marketing mix”. The Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance (GPCA)<sup>1</sup>, Seth Godin<sup>2</sup>, and Diane Ragsdale<sup>3</sup> consider having a remarkable product or service one of the most important steps to instigating word-of-mouth.

If the product, production or service is not remarkable enough to create an automatic buzz, and/or if the marketer wants to ensure word-of-mouth spreads quickly, there are other techniques that can be built directly into the marketing mix. One of the most popular tools for this is the Internet. The GPCA<sup>4</sup> and *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet*<sup>5</sup> both describe the importance of using social media and content sharing sites as a word-of-mouth marketing tool. The hottest forms of social media today include Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Yelp, and YouTube. Word-of-mouth marketing on the internet is not limited to social media. *Connected Marketing*<sup>6</sup> and *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet*<sup>7</sup> stress the

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<sup>1</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. “Surviving the Culture Change.” Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Conrad Levinson, Mitch Meyerson and Mary Eule Scarborough. *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet: The Definitive Guide from the Father of Guerrilla Marketing*. (Jere L. Calmes, 2008), 183-185.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Corcoran, Paul Marsden, Bernd Röthlingshöfer and Thomas Zorbach. “Blog Marketing.” In *Connected Marketing*, ed. by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 148-152.

<sup>7</sup> Jay Conrad Levinson, Mitch Meyerson and Mary Eule Scarborough. *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet: The Definitive Guide from the Father of Guerrilla Marketing*. (Jere L. Calmes, 2008), 38.

importance of blogs; this can include business, third person and so-called “faux blogs”. A faux blog is a blog that is set up and maintained by the business that is being promoted on the blog, but the blog is presented as though a consumer established and operated it. Finally, word-of-mouth marketing can be done online through the use of viral campaigns as described by Oetting<sup>8</sup> and Lenderman. If an organization can create a website, YouTube clip, email, or any other online marketing campaign that is surprising or entertaining enough for viewers to pass it along, it can “run circles around traditional advertising and marketing at a fraction of the cost.”<sup>9</sup> For a full list of online tools referenced in this paper, please see the chart below.

### Online Marketing Tools

(This chart only includes tools mentioned in this paper.)

Online Tool	Description	Marketing/Word-of-Mouth Benefits
Blogs	A website where the content is updated regularly and followed by interested readers.	Marketers can create a blog to keep their consumers up to date about the activities of their business. Individuals can also create blogs to express their opinions about a topic or topics.
Facebook	A social networking, content sharing site.	Marketers can create pages for their organization and keep consumers updated daily. Consumers can share their thoughts on products and/or services with hundreds of friends at the same time.
Flickr	A photo sharing and management site.	Marketers can create a Flickr account and share photos of things like special events with their consumers. Consumers can share their experiences with organizations through photos they may have taken at special events.
Twitter	An information network where people can post their thoughts, their ideas, whereabouts etc.	Marketers can create their own Twitter page and tweet about their product to their followers. Consumers can tweet about their experience with a product to their followers.
Yelp	A site where consumers can write reviews and businesses can post special offers.	Consumers can get real reviews from their peers about businesses. Businesses can see what consumers are saying about them as well as post special offers.
YouTube	A video sharing site	Marketers can create videos about their business that, if done right, can go viral and create buzz.

<sup>8</sup> Oetting, Martin. “How to Manage Connected Marketing.” In *Connected Marketing*, ed. by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden, 232-266. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 243.

<sup>9</sup> Max Lenderman. *Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 122.

Figure 1 - Online Marketing Tools

While the Internet is a popular and easy to use tool for spreading word-of-mouth, there are other offline methods that are also effective. Marketers can encourage individuals who are already emotionally invested in their product or service to get others interested and talking. Godin<sup>10</sup>, many of the authors in *Connected Marketing*, and Lenderman and Ragsdale<sup>11</sup> categorize these people in different ways including opinion leaders, brand adopters, brand adorers, brand advocates, brand ambassadors, alphas, early adopters, mavens, innovators, fans, sneezers, and influentials. Lenderman defines these types of people as the “consumer base that is at the top of the pyramid, the types of personalities who can spark and spread buzz that the masses listen to. ...[People that] do not respond to traditional marketing. ...[People that] need to be inspired by the brand, product or service and marketing.”<sup>12</sup> Actively engaging these people, as part of the marketing plan is an important step in making sure word-of-mouth is spreading quickly and to the right people.

Referral programs are another way that marketers can actively build word-of-mouth into their campaigns. Some examples of referral programs include introduce-a-friend, member-get-member, and customer-get-customer. These programs have the potential to reward both the brand advocate who is

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<sup>10</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 4, 16, 28-31, 39, 118.

<sup>11</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. “Surviving the Culture Change.” Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Max Lenderman. *Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 70-71.

referring the product or service and the new customer who has been referred.<sup>13</sup> As GPCA states, referral programs “reduce purchase risk and increase confidence, connection and anticipation.”<sup>14</sup>

While GPCA<sup>15</sup>, Godin<sup>16</sup>, and Ragsdale<sup>17</sup> make the connection that a remarkable product or service acts as its own word-of-mouth, every author cited in this paper agrees that products must be remarkable in order to create word-of-mouth. According to Godin, a remarkable product or service does not just get the attention of the consumers, but causes the consumers to seek it out.<sup>18</sup> Godin states that what makes something remarkable, “. . . is if it is horrible beyond belief or if the service is so unexpected that you need to share it.”<sup>19</sup> The GPCA emphasizes that “everything begins with product,”<sup>20</sup> but arts and cultural organizations need to remember that they should be making the whole experience remarkable and not just the end product, such as the exhibit or production. According to the GPCA<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rusticus, Sven. “Creating Brand Advocates.” In *Connected Marketing*, ed. by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. “Surviving the Culture Change.” Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 67.

<sup>20</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. (Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009), 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

study and Ragsdale's speech<sup>22</sup>, organizations must keep in mind not only the quality of the performance, but also the logistics of attending the performance, which can include affordability; [the event] not [being] too crowded; good pacing, little waiting; good seats, acoustics, sightlines; stress-free logistics; gestures of gratitude; genuinely welcoming service and more relaxed and social environments when appropriate.

Godin's entire book, *Purple Cow*, focuses on the idea that the only way to be successful is to have a remarkable product or service. With this in mind, he asks the reader how an organization could be run by anyone but a marketer. Unlike in the past when marketing was done after the product was created, now "marketing is the product and vice versa."<sup>23</sup> Godin recommends that organizations find the market niche first, and then make a remarkable product for that market.<sup>24</sup> Both GPCA<sup>25</sup> and Ragsdale<sup>26</sup> recommend that organizations reach out to niche markets. To take this further Godin states that "marketing is the act of inventing the product. The effort of designing it. The craft of producing it. The art of pricing it. The technique of selling it."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. "Surviving the Culture Change." Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 87-88.

<sup>24</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 84.

<sup>25</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. "Surviving the Culture Change." Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 96.

In *Connected Marketing*, Marsden<sup>28</sup> and Oetting<sup>29</sup> make the claim that marketing must be careful to sell the product and not the marketing. Organizations have to create a product that stands out enough that it makes people want to talk about it. Levinson describes this as the “amazement” technique or the “wow” factor. Again, organizations must have unique products and/or exceptional services.<sup>30</sup> Lenderman categorizes this as a benefit to the consumer, explaining that, “successful brands exist and sustain their relevance by discerning, understanding and delivering what consumers value, appreciate and prioritize.”<sup>31</sup> He supports this idea by quoting Paul Hawken, who states that “in a postindustrial age, the critical shortages are time and meaning. And people will only give up their time for meaning.”<sup>32</sup> There must be “a personal interaction between consumer and brand to create a memorable experience that is nothing less than impressive.”<sup>33</sup> For arts organizations this personal interaction must be taking into consideration before, during, and after the experience. This will “deepen the consumers connection, satisfaction and the likelihood that they will come back and bring friends.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Marsden, Paul. “Introduction and Summary.” In *Connected Marketing*, edited by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), xxvi.

<sup>29</sup> Oetting, Martin. “How to Manage Connected Marketing.” In *Connected Marketing*, ed. by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 233.

<sup>30</sup> Jay Conrad Levinson, Mitch Meyerson and Mary Eule Scarborough. *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet: The Definitive Guide from the Father of Guerrilla Marketing*. (Jere L. Calmes, 2008), 8, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Max Lenderman. *Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 32, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Max Lenderman. *Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 47.

<sup>33</sup> Max Lenderman. *Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 50.

<sup>34</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

It should be noted that the more competitors there are in a particular market, the harder this can be to accomplish. According to the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, the Greater Philadelphia Region is home to well over 100 producing theaters.<sup>35</sup> As one can see, a field as crowded as this can create a large amount of competition. In addition to over 100 producing theaters in the area, companies are also competing with a plethora of other leisure activities such as galleries, museums, dance companies, movies, professional sports, bowling, and hiking, to name a few. Theaters must keep this in mind, when developing programs and creating experiences, to engage their audiences.

A focus group study referenced in the GPCA report showed that many people attending arts and cultural events “did not feel that the arts were consistently relevant to them personally, or felt that the experience was a letdown.”<sup>36</sup> The need for the product to be remarkable is apparent when considering these focus group responses in the context of data that shows “consumers dropping out of the cultural community after just one experience.”<sup>37</sup> A recommendation the *Research Into Action* study has on how to reverse this pattern is to change the priority from ticket sales to engagement. The popularity of social media and content sharing sites are also proof that consumers are “actively creative and like to talk back.”<sup>38</sup> Evidence of this can be seen in all of

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<sup>35</sup> Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia. “About the Theatre Alliance: Mission & History,” Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia. <http://www.theatrealliance.org/about.html> (accessed January 18, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

the original videos and comments that are posted on YouTube along with the posts and tweets on blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and other relevant sites. If theaters could take that idea of online engagement and creativity, make it more tactile, possibly take it offline, and work it into their programs for their audience members, they may have a better chance of grabbing their interest. If done right, the product could be just as popular to today's audience as all of these social media and content sharing sites are. This would indeed make the product more remarkable with the help of the audience, and it would certainly change what is now "passive attendance to active participation."<sup>39</sup>

Diane Ragsdale, an Associate Program Officer at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, touches on this same idea of engagement in her 2009 speech to the Vancouver Arts Summit, but her focus is specific to the younger audience base that need to feel some connection to what they are experiencing. She states that "no podcast, YouTube video, Tweet, or other new strategy is going to make 25 year olds want to go to a performance that doesn't seem relevant to their lives in a venue in which they do not see other people their age. ... To exist, to thrive, to be artistically vibrant in the 21st century, arts organizations need to adopt to this culture change in order to attain, maintain, or regain their relevancy."<sup>40</sup> This culture change is the need of audience members to participate and be creative.

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<sup>39</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. "Surviving the Culture Change." Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.



Organizations should be “allowing patrons to be active participants and devoted fans and catalysts for participation by others ....”<sup>41</sup>

Not only are consumers demanding a change in products and services, but they are also changing the way organizations are marketing them. A major catalyst for this is the changing technology and communication among consumers. *Connected Marketing*, edited by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden, is centered on the idea that traditional marketing techniques are not working anymore, and that word-of-mouth is the main influence on people’s purchasing decisions. In fact, word-of-mouth drives two-thirds of the United States economy and is far more powerful than paid for advertising.<sup>42</sup> Examining it at a more local level, GPCA claims that word-of-mouth is one of the top three reasons that influence Philadelphians’ in attending a cultural event.<sup>43</sup> Ragsdale states this fact as common knowledge in her speech, “If I encourage my friends to purchase a piece of music or go to a performance, it’s going to have a much greater impact than if the organization itself does.”<sup>44</sup>

The GPCA, Lenderman, Levinson, and Ragsdale stress their claims that the internet, including online media, is changing the way marketing needs to be approached. “The explosion of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Yelp, etc.) is not an isolated or even new phenomenon. It is just the current technology-enabled

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<sup>41</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. “Surviving the Culture Change.” Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Marsden, Paul. “Introduction and Summary.” In *Connected Marketing*, edited by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), xvi-xxv.

<sup>43</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. “Surviving the Culture Change.” Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

manifestation of our longstanding human need to connect with one another. ... Focus group research reveals that while awareness is built through traditional paid advertising, planning and decision making takes place online. Younger audiences tend to gather their information via word-of-mouth through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, blogs, review sites like Yelp.com, and content sites like YouTube.”<sup>45</sup> The Internet “is the most powerful, exciting, and revolutionary marketing tool ever created.”<sup>46</sup> “Over the past decade plus, and at an ever increasing clip, new media technologies have begun to shift the relationships between people, space and time and change the ways that people create, consume, commune, and communicate.”<sup>47</sup> Lenderman has also suggested that the Internet is changing the way people talk to each other. The buzz of a product or service can spread more quickly from person to person and has changed the “role of the consumer from isolated to connected, from unaware to informed, from passive to active.”<sup>48</sup> Organizations need to consider all of this when creating products and services, and how they market them.

Oetting and Levison<sup>49</sup> recommend that businesses set up a blog. Blogs are the perfect example of a change in the way people talk to each other. Anyone can set up a blog to sound off on any topic of his or her choice. They are “user-

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<sup>45</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Jay Conrad Levinson, Mitch Meyerson and Mary Eule Scarborough. *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet: The Definitive Guide from the Father of Guerrilla Marketing*. (Jere L. Calmes, 2008), 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. “Surviving the Culture Change.” Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Max Lenderman. *Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 52, 182.

<sup>49</sup> Jay Conrad Levinson, Mitch Meyerson and Mary Eule Scarborough. *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet: The Definitive Guide from the Father of Guerrilla Marketing*. (Jere L. Calmes, 2008), 38.

generated media.”<sup>50</sup> There are business blogs in which an organization can discuss any number of topics about their products, services, day-to-day activities, special events, etc. There are third-person blogs where individuals can let their feelings known on a business or a number of businesses. Depending on the following of the blog, it could reach a few friends and family members or thousands of consumers. Finally there are faux blogs<sup>51</sup>, which according to the authors of *Connected Marketing*, are considered controversial in the marketing world because consumers who follow such a blog do not know they are being marketed to; if the business is discovered as the actual author of the blog, this has the potential to cost them customers who feel mislead or betrayed.<sup>52</sup> The advantage of a business setting up a creditable blog are many: it does not cost a lot of money; it is a fast way to get information out to the public; if the blog is set up and maintained properly, it has the potential to go viral and give personality to the business; results can be tracked; the blog can offer the possibility of feedback from consumers; it can generate interest in a product; drive action and sales; create goodwill; establish a company’s expertise in a given field; and even establish dialogue with employees.<sup>53</sup>

While marketers today have many new tools to assist them, they also face challenges. One of these challenges is the over-saturation of advertising and

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<sup>50</sup> Oetting, Martin. “How to Manage Connected Marketing.” In *Connected Marketing*, edited by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden, 232-266. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 256.

<sup>51</sup> For more information on faux blogs, see pages 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Corcoran, Paul Marsden, Bernd Röthlingshöfer and Thomas Zorbach. “Blog Marketing.” In *Connected Marketing*, ed by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006). 148-152.

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Corcoran, Paul Marsden, Bernd Röthlingshöfer and Thomas Zorbach. “Blog Marketing.” In *Connected Marketing*, ed by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006). 153-155.

marketing, along with the growing marketing literacy on the part of the consumer. According to the GPCA study the average consumer is exposed to hundreds of marketing messages per day.<sup>54</sup> Not only is it difficult to cut through the clutter of all of the other marketing messages out there, but because of this over-saturation, consumers have conditioned themselves to block most of it out. Lenderman, Godin, and Ragsdale<sup>55</sup> also speak to this challenge. Lenderman sites a survey that was conducted in 2004 by Yankelovich Partners. This survey found that “65 percent of consumers feel that more regulations and limits should be imposed on marketing because they are constantly bombarded with too much advertising, and 61 percent feel that advertising is out of control.”<sup>56</sup> Godin states that in addition to consumers no longer paying attention to traditional advertising and marketing, they are also less inclined to pass a recommendation over to a friend, family member, or co-worker unless they are certain the person will enjoy the product or service.<sup>57</sup> This challenge has lead to the growing need for not only innovative word-of-mouth marketing techniques that cut through the clutter and get consumers talking, but as stated before, innovative products and services.

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<sup>54</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Ragsdale, Diane E. “Surviving the Culture Change.” Vancouver Arts Summit, presented by the Alliance for Arts and Culture and 2010 Legacies Now, Vancouver Public Library, Vancouver, Canada, June 25, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Max Lenderman. *Experience the Message: How Experiential Marketing is Changing the Brand World*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2006), 24-25.

<sup>57</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 12, 16.

No matter what tools marketers are using to promote word-of-mouth Godin, Nyilasy<sup>58</sup>, and Levinson<sup>59</sup> all agree that tracking the results is important. “Companies that measure will quickly optimize their offerings and make them more trustworthy. As it becomes easier to monitor informal consumer networks, the winners will be companies that figure out what’s working fastest – and do it more (and figure out what’s not working – and kill it).”<sup>60</sup> The problem with these resources is none of the authors offer advice on how to track the results of word-of-mouth marketing; they simply insist that it needs to be done.

Since all of the secondary research on word-of-mouth marketing reviewed above was focused on the work of for-profit companies throughout the world, I decided to focus my primary research on non-profit theater companies in Philadelphia in order to provide non-profit arts and cultural organizations relevant information and advice for their field. I have conducted in person or phone interviews with either the marketing or artistic directors of nine non-profit theater companies in Philadelphia. These interviews were conducted in order to collect qualitative data regarding the general use of and effectiveness of word-of-mouth marketing techniques in these theater companies’ marketing campaigns. I choose to look at the word-of-mouth techniques in a theater-rich community like Philadelphia because it allowed me to get a full picture of what strategies different size companies are initiating. I chose to only look at non-profit theater companies

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<sup>58</sup> Nyilasy, Greg. “Word of Mouth: What We Really Know – and What We Don’t.” In *Connected Marketing*, edited by Justin Kirby and Paul Marsden, (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 174.

<sup>59</sup> Jay Conrad Levinson, Mitch Meyerson and Mary Eule Scarborough. *Guerrilla Marketing on the Internet: The Definitive Guide from the Father of Guerrilla Marketing*. (Jere L. Calmes, 2008), 26-27.

<sup>60</sup> Seth Godin. *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 59.

as opposed to many different arts organizations in hopes that other types of arts and cultural organizations will be able to translate the results for their own use if they so desire.

I reached out to 42 theater companies in Philadelphia and was able to obtain interviews from representatives of nine companies. I believe the response rate was low due to the fact that I was looking to conduct interviews close to the holidays, which is usually a busy time for most individuals. The nine companies I spoke with were Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, BCKSEET Productions, Drexel University's Theatre Program, InterAct Theatre Company, Philadelphia Theatre Workshop, Plays & Players, Shakespeare in Clark Park, Simpatico Theatre Project, and Walnut Street Theatre. Although most organizations I spoke with fall into the small budget range (up to \$250,000), I spoke to one medium-sized organization (between \$250,000 to \$1 million) and two large organizations (over \$1 million). All together, then, my interview subjects represent a wide range of budgets and staff sizes, as can be seen below, in Figure 2. The mission statements of these companies can be found in Appendix A.

## Theater Companies Staff Size and Budget

Theater	Staff Size	Budget Size and Category	Fiscal Year
Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts	29 <sup>61</sup>	\$5,000,000 <sup>62</sup> (Large)	2009
BCKSEET Productions	5 <sup>63</sup>	34,000 <sup>64</sup> (Small)	2009
Drexel University's Theatre Program	1 <sup>65</sup>	\$72,000 <sup>66</sup> (Small)	2009
InterAct Theatre Company	11 <sup>67</sup>	666,417 <sup>68</sup> (Medium)	2009
Philadelphia Theatre Workshop	4 <sup>69</sup>	50,472 <sup>70</sup> (Small)	2008
Plays & Players	2 <sup>71</sup>	84,207 <sup>72</sup> (Small)	2007
Shakespeare in Clark Park	4 <sup>73</sup>	26,536 <sup>74</sup> (Small)	2009
Simpatico Theatre Project	3 <sup>75</sup>	16,300 <sup>76</sup> (Small)	2009
Walnut Street Theatre	647 <sup>77</sup>	14,002,037 <sup>78</sup> (Large)	2008

Figure 2 – Theater Companies' Staff Size and Budget

<sup>61</sup> Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. "About Us," Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. <http://www.pennpresents.org/about/staff.php> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 11 June 2010. Notes, Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>63</sup> BCKSEET Productions. "About," BCKSEET Productions. <http://www.wix.com/BCKSEET/newbck> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> DeCandia, Greg. 30 June 2010. Facebook message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive

<sup>65</sup> Anselmo, Nick. 12 May 2010. E-mail message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>66</sup> Anselmo, Nick. 12 May 2010. E-mail message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>67</sup> InterAct Theatre Company. "About InterAct . . . Contact Us," InterAct Theatre Company. <http://www.interacttheatre.org/contact-us.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> GuideStar, "Interact, Inc," GuideStar. <http://www2.guidestar.org/organizations/23-2555449/interact.aspx#> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> Philadelphia Theatre Workshop. "About Staff," Philadelphia Theatre Workshop. <http://www.philadelphiatheatreworkshop.org/AboutStaff-1437.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>70</sup> GuideStar, "Philadelphia Theatre Workshop," GuideStar. <http://www2.guidestar.org/organizations/30-0286548/philadelphia-theatre-workshop.aspx#> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> Plays & Players. "Plays & Players Staff," Plays & Players. <http://www.playsandplayers.org/about/staff> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>72</sup> GuideStar, "Plays and Players," GuideStar. <http://www2.guidestar.org/organizations/23-0979585/plays-players.aspx#> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> Shakespeare in Clark Park, "Who We Are," Shakespeare in Clark Park. <http://shakespeareinclarkpark.org/about/staff.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>74</sup> Möller, Maria. 20 June 2010. E-mail message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>75</sup> Simpatico Theatre Project, "Simpaticompany," Simpatico Theatre Project. <http://simpaticotheatre.org/landing/company/simpaticompany/> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. 27 June 2010. Facebook message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive

<sup>77</sup> Turlik, Lauren. 23 April 2010. E-mail message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>78</sup> GuideStar, "Walnut Street Theatre Corp," GuideStar. <http://www2.guidestar.org/organizations/23-1715152/walnut-street-theatre-corp.aspx#> (accessed June 27, 2010).

The Philadelphia theater companies interviewed for this paper do not typically come across as being as remarkable, from a word-of-mouth marketing standpoint as they think they do. While each company is executing varying methods of word-of-mouth marketing techniques with varying levels of expertise and consistency in their campaigns, not all are tracking their efforts, simply because of time, resources, and other priorities.

Over the next three chapters, using the information I gathered from these interviews, I will discuss what each of the nine companies believes makes their organization remarkable, and how they compare to their peers in my interview sampling. I will look at the techniques they are using, how they are tracking these efforts, and if they believe them to be effective.



## CHAPTER ONE - BEING REMARKABLE

It is close to impossible for word-of-mouth to become a marketing tool if an organization or the product and/or service it supplies is not remarkable. Before determining if and how Philadelphia theater companies are using word-of-mouth marketing techniques, it is important to determine if and why they consider themselves remarkable. I did not, when inquiring into what makes each organization remarkable, define the concept for the interviewees. I preferred to let them speak for themselves. This being said, many of the companies fell short of being remarkable because they either did not understand the question, or in fact, do not stand out in their field as much as they think they do.

Nicole Cook, the Director of Marketing & Communications for the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, an entity under the University of Pennsylvania, agrees that in order for an organization or a production to gain word-of-mouth momentum, it has to be remarkable. “I think probably the biggest, the most important thing, in word-of-mouth, is really developing good content. And that I think for arts marketers it isn’t something we always think about because we usually . . . rely on the artistic department to do that, to provide

the content.”<sup>79</sup> As they develop their strategic plan, Annenberg and Cook are currently embracing the idea of developing content that will make the Annenberg stand out as a remarkable performing organization: “I think you have to have something that differentiates yourself. You have to have something that defines you and makes you remarkable otherwise you will get passed over. ... Search beyond the who, what, where, when and how.” Cook went on to say that it is not only important to have interesting content that is buzz worthy, but that the content must line up with the target audience.<sup>80</sup>

So, with over 100 producing theater companies in the Greater Philadelphia Region, and with a sixty percent increase in arts organizations across the country and only a six percent increase in attendance between 1990 and 2001<sup>81</sup>, how do the artistic directors, directors of marketing and public relations, marketing chair, and professor interviewed for this paper think that they stand out among the crowd? When asked this question about Annenberg, Cook reflected:

The thing that really sets us apart is being part of Penn. I really feel that being part of Penn is our hugest asset. From the consumers’ perspective I think we can offer programming that is a little bit more edgy and a little bit more pushing the envelope. Whether or not we manage to always do that, it’s the direction we want to go in.

Because we are a part of a University, where we are on the forefront of thought, and we are really in a place where issues are explored, we want to be a part of that. I think it is really part of our brand, because we also have connections with faculty and students and I think that really lets us deal with contemporary ideas and issues through

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<sup>79</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>80</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>81</sup> *Research Into Action: Pathways to New Opportunities*. Philadelphia: Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, 2009.

an artistic experience. The program we are launching in January<sup>82</sup> is a perfect example of something that we do that probably not a lot of other organizations are going to do. We are exploring current issues such as world hunger, AIDS, and we are taking a Penn professor and exploring that issue, but we also have these artists to kind of talk about their thoughts on it as well. As we define ourselves more, I can assure you we will be including Penn as part of our brand.<sup>83</sup>

Drexel University's Theater Program, while also an entity tied closely to a university, has a very different set of programming and marketing priorities from Annenberg. The marketing for Drexel's productions is done almost entirely by students.<sup>84</sup> Nick Anselmo, the Theatre Program Director for Mandell Professionals in Residence Project, ("a collaborative program bringing theatre and dance professionals to the Drexel campus for performances, production and instruction") and the Director and Founder/Artistic Director for The Late Night Series, ("a weekly student-run open mic that offers students and local professionals an opportunity to showcase their talents.")<sup>85</sup>, thinks that what makes Drexel University's Theater Program remarkable is:

The fact that you have untrained people on a volunteer basis who really create high-level work is pretty impressive. I don't think anybody is doing the level of work that they [Drexel's theatre program] are doing with the students that they [other universities] have. I hire some of the best directors in the city I feel, and they enjoy working here because of that. Everybody is working as hard as they can.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> The program being launched in January that Cook describes is called *Artists & Audiences Changing Lives* and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two of this paper.

<sup>83</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>84</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>85</sup> *Drexel University's Department of Performing Arts* (PA: Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts and Design, 2009).

<sup>86</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

While Anselmo claims this to be the remarkable aspect of his program it appears to only be seen as remarkable within the limited context of the Drexel campus. This can partly be derived from his statement that he is aware that it is not necessarily realistic to try and bring in an outside audience to see the performances.<sup>87</sup> Setting realistic goals for an organization can certainly mean the difference between a flop and a remarkable product, but in a city saturated with theaters and higher education, a major university should have at least some goals for outside constituents to enjoy the experience they work so hard to offer. Having students lead the production efforts is not enough.

Gregory G DeCandia, Artistic Director and Founder of BCKSEET Productions, likes to think that what makes BCKSEET remarkable is a fairly recent development, which was their move to becoming a repertory company. While this may not be unusual in the world of theater, it is rare for a Philadelphia theater, especially among my sample group.

We allow our artists to grow over an entire season. To facilitate that growth as an actor, as a designer, and to really be able to establish a consistent portfolio for each of these people. Mainly, the designers to show their versatility in the space, since we never do anything in the same spot at least twice in a row. And for the actors, to be able to establish a relationship. When you go into your last show everybody knows each other, everybody knows how each other works. You are ready to dive in a lot quicker. You know the limitations that people are working with, and try to play to those a little bit more, which I think makes for a stronger thing.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>88</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

DeCandia also touches on the importance of brand, something that not a lot of organizations that were interviewed discussed:

Ultimately it creates a stronger brand. When you are looking at the season you have a brand. These are the people that you are going to be seeing. These are the designs that you will be experiencing throughout the year. It also shows the versatility of all of the people as well. I think it's a lot of fun.<sup>89</sup>

If all of the theater companies in the Greater Philadelphia Region branded their organization it would be much easier for their brand ambassadors to spread word-of-mouth about the organization. Walnut Street Theater and InterAct Theatre Company, two organizations interviewed for this paper, have done a very good job at branding themselves, and have had much success over the years.

Ralph Weeks, Director of Marketing and Public Relations for Walnut Street, believes the strongest theaters are well-branded. Weeks believes that in general the theaters in the city of Philadelphia are well branded. Audiences know which companies to turn to depending on what type of theater they are looking to see. Weeks is adamant that what makes Walnut Street so remarkable is that it is the oldest theater in the country, and it is the most popular theater in Philadelphia.<sup>90</sup> It is often marketed as such.

InterAct Theatre is a much different type of company than Walnut Street, but ask almost anyone who has been to their shows what InterAct's mission is and most likely the theme of politics will be brought up. According to David Golston, InterAct's Director of Marketing & Public Relations, this is part of what makes

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<sup>89</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>90</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive.

InterAct remarkable. “InterAct is basically a political theater company. All of the shows that we do have some sort of social issue about them or something that was recently in the news.”<sup>91</sup> InterAct’s uniqueness does not stop at producing politically and socially relevant pieces of theater.

We reach out to communities related to the issues of the plays that we do. Because of that, because of the issues involved in the plays that we produce there is generally a community of those people out there and we always spend a great deal of time reaching out to them. The demographics of those will change widely from play to play. Because we are a niche theater it creates a real sense of community among the people that see the plays and amongst the communities that we are reaching out to.<sup>92</sup>

Often my interviewees pointed to their identity with the community as something that makes their theaters remarkable; this in turn, negates this quality that they claim makes their organization remarkable. InterAct<sup>93</sup>, BCKSEET<sup>94</sup>, Plays & Players<sup>95</sup>, Shakespeare in Clark Park<sup>96</sup>, and Simpatico Theatre Project<sup>97</sup> all mentioned this quality when speaking of their own organizations. Some of them even mentioned another theater company from this list as serving a similar purpose.

According to DeCandia another aspect that makes BCKSEET remarkable is their “Commitment to the community. With all of our talkbacks and donations.

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<sup>91</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>92</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>93</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>94</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>95</sup> Student, Daniel. Interview by author, 7 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>96</sup> Möller, Maria. Interview by author, 2 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>97</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

With every single show there is some organization that we are working with and raising their awareness as well.”<sup>98</sup> Daniel Student, the Marketing Committee Chair at Plays & Players, mentioned the aspect of community and volunteer spirit that the company creates for the people that volunteer there. This has grown not only from their many volunteers, but also from the fact that they have their own space in which to nurture this sense of community, and because these volunteers feel inclined to go out and informally talk about the theater to people who are not involved.<sup>99</sup> Maria Möller, Co-Artistic Director of Shakespeare in Clark Park, claims the use of a community-friendly location is part of what makes them remarkable<sup>100</sup>, and Jennifer Pratt, of Simpatico Theatre Project, commented that the community action they take on as part of their mission allows them to create a bridge between the issues they are exploring and how their audience can serve these issues.<sup>101</sup> If all of these companies are claiming community development as part of what makes them remarkable, as part of what makes them stand out among the 100 plus theaters in the Greater Philadelphia Region, it is fair to ask - is this really all that remarkable? Perhaps this city is big enough for all of these theaters to have a similar mission, or perhaps they need to more sharply define which niche communities they are actually trying to reach.

Of course, almost all of these theaters have other aspects that make them remarkable. Pratt was the only one to not mention anything else besides using art

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<sup>98</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>99</sup> Student, Daniel. Interview by author, 7 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>100</sup> Möller, Maria. Interview by author, 2 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive

<sup>101</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

towards social good when asked what makes her company remarkable.<sup>102</sup> Golston added that another remarkable aspect of InterAct stems from their work with playwrights:

We are working on world premieres. It is part of our mission to work with playwrights to develop new scripts. That doesn't necessarily make us unique in Philadelphia, because there are a lot of theaters that do world premiere shows. Although, if you look we have done 68 or 69 shows and I think 28 of them have been world premieres and 33 of them have been second or third performances. The vast majority of what we do is work with playwrights to develop new scripts. That is not true of most of the other theater companies in Philadelphia.<sup>103</sup>

While working with playwrights to develop new scripts may not be what most other theater companies in Philadelphia are doing, there are two companies in my sample that focus on this activity as part of their programming. Plays and Players has five performance partnerships with other organizations. One recent partnership with the Philadelphia Dramatist Center has led to the First Friday New Play Reading Series. According to the Plays & Players website, this series provides an opportunity for Philadelphia's best playwrights to showcase their work for the first time. It also gives audience members an opportunity to mingle with the artists at Plays & Players' own Quig's Pub<sup>104</sup> (another remarkable feature of Plays & Players according to Student). They also have two or three presenting partnerships where they collaborate with the organizations to get their shows up

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<sup>102</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>103</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>104</sup> Plays & Players. "Performance: First Friday New Play Reading Series," Plays & Players. <http://www.playsandplayers.org/performance/playreading> (accessed January 20, 2010).



and running. This also includes helping the organizations with their marketing efforts.<sup>105</sup>

Philadelphia Theatre Workshop's Artistic Director, Bill Felty thinks that what makes his company remarkable is that the mission is totally unique.

According to Felty, except for Philadelphia Young Playwrights, which has a fairly specific demographic they are trying to reach, they are the only company in Philadelphia that has a focus on world premieres of Philadelphia playwrights.<sup>106</sup>

While Philadelphia Theatre Workshop may be the only theater in Philadelphia with a focus on world premieres of adult Philadelphia playwrights, they clearly do not have the monopoly on Philadelphia playwrights or world premieres.

Möller mentions that what also makes Shakespeare in Clark Park stand out are that the performances are free and in Clark Park, which is a high profile and accessible location. They attract a very large and diverse audience. Although Möller has no proof, she believes that because of their location they have the most diverse audience members in Philadelphia. Their audience can range from homeless people to African immigrants to anarchist punks. In addition to location and creating a sense of community, Möller mentions the artistically engaging and cutting edge work that Shakespeare in Clark Park does.<sup>107</sup> In terms of what makes their work artistically engaging, Maria states:

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<sup>105</sup> Student, Daniel. Interview by author, 7 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>106</sup> Felty, Bill. Interview by author, 10 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>107</sup> Möller, Maria. Interview by author, 2 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

We draw on a couple of things. One is our informal motto: "never put a stage on the park". Many people ask if it is our dream to build an amphitheatre in Clark Park, to have more of a traditional stage. That's not our dream: we don't want to try to recreate a theatre outdoors. We want to do a play in the outdoors.

Another thing is that we are committed to doing Shakespeare that is accessible to a diverse audience --- not just people who are used to going to the theatre. We don't do stuffy Shakespeare with a faux British accent or "old-timey" Shakespeare. The flip side of that is that we think that Shakespeare is naturally accessible --- so we also try to avoid the temptation of thinking that our audience can't follow it. We don't want to talk down to the audience, and we don't want to "talk up."

Lastly, we draw from some of Philly's most innovative artists --- many of whom are people who create the devised work that Philly had become known for. This brings a fresh approach to the work and a strong sense of ensemble and creative empowerment. These artists include our actors, composers, choreographers and directors.<sup>108</sup>

I would agree that doing theater outdoors definitely makes Shakespeare in Clark Park remarkable compared to many of the theater companies in Philadelphia, however, making Shakespeare accessible and working with innovative artists, unfortunately, does not.

Word-of-mouth can only gain momentum if an organization, service or product is remarkable. The most important areas that theaters need to keep in mind when considering what makes their organization stand out are content and brand. These are two factors that go hand in hand. While most of the theaters being interviewed are of course considering content, they are not necessarily considering brand. While their content may be good or even exceptional it is not necessarily allowing them to stand out from the other theater companies in Philadelphia.

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<sup>108</sup> Möller, Maria. 20 June 2010. E-mail message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

In my small sample group there is considerable brand overlap. If an audience member wants to see a world premiere by a Philadelphia playwright, she has at least two different companies to choose from, and if she simply wants to see a world premiere, she has at least three options. If she wants to feel a sense of community when attending a performance, she has at least five different options. If she wants to see a repertory theater there is only one option from this select group, making her decision much easier.

Theater companies have a lot of competition in Philadelphia. If they want any chance of being talked about and being noticed they need to define what makes them noticeable, and that cannot be defined in a vacuum. When a theater is defining what makes it remarkable, that theater needs to consider what makes every other theater remarkable. If this does not occur we as audience members end up with cookie cutter choices for our entertainment, education and social outings. When everything is the same, there is nothing worth talking about.

## CHAPTER TWO – WHICH WORD-OF-MOUTH TECHNIQUES ARE PHILADELPHIA THEATERS USING AND WHY?

### I. WHICH TECHNIQUES ARE BEING USED

As discussed in the introduction, for-profits have found plenty of ways to work word-of-mouth techniques into their marketing campaigns. All of the theater companies interviewed for this paper either integrated some form of word-of-mouth into their campaigns, or recognized that word-of-mouth naturally comes into play. Although word-of-mouth is recognized as an important aspect of marketing for these theater companies, it is not always a priority when the personnel of these theater companies develop their marketing plans. Cook gives a perfect example of how priorities work in these companies by stating, “I always find that it [word-of-mouth marketing] kind of gets to be lower on the list when it should be the highest thing on the list, because it is the thing that most people site ... when they say how they heard about the thing. ... We’re not putting real campaigns around it like we do with our other stuff.”<sup>109</sup>

Although, as Cook states, word-of-mouth techniques are not on the top of the list of priorities for marketing shows, Annenberg did launch a referral

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<sup>109</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

program along with the start of their *Artists & Audiences Changing Lives* program in January 2010:

We are asking people to sign up for a program called *Audiences Changing Lives*. A program that is geared towards people who are really devoted and interested in causes and in making the world a better place. So we picked a couple artists that we think will align with the values of those specific ticket buyers. We are making a club ... so that they will get special offers to donate a portion of their ticket price to the cause, and when they come to a performance they will get a chance to talk to the artist about that cause. ... [We are] asking people to register for this club. There is no cost; you just have to be interested. We want people to spread the word because we think these people probably have friends just like them. So we are asking them when they initial register to pass this on to their friends.<sup>110</sup>

InterAct also has a referral program in place:

We do several campaigns where we're offering people who come to the shows, or subscribe to the theater, ticket discounts to bring their friends. We have a bring-a-friend subscription. Both the subscriber and the friend get a discount on their subscription if they [the friend] are new to the theater ... We also offer subscribers half price single tickets to encourage them to bring someone else.<sup>111</sup>

Telemarketing is another way a referral program can be initiated.

According to Cook, it is easy for the person being solicited to simply give the telemarketer the name and number of a friend who might be interested in receiving more information about the company.<sup>112</sup> It is very easy if there is an incentive involved. This year Annenberg gave away tickets to subscribers so they could bring a friend. The Annenberg asked for the friend's information so they could have tickets ready at will call, and then they would add the information to

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<sup>110</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>111</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>112</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

their email list. It is a great way to get rid of a lot of tickets for a performance that is not selling well. The incentive is twofold; the subscriber gets to bring a friend, and she also gets to help an organization she supports build its audience.<sup>113</sup>

Many of the companies interviewed cited social media and content sharing sites as one of their planned word-of-mouth efforts.<sup>114</sup>

Social media is a great platform for spreading word-of-mouth. We [Annenberg] started on Facebook just doing a little bit, and it is hard to tell if it is working or not . . . . Social media, people can do really easily. It might not be a physical conversation, but it is still a conversation online.<sup>115</sup>

Looking at Annenberg's Facebook page it is clear that this is probably low on their list of priorities; they only have 613 fans.<sup>116</sup> This is a small number even when compared to the much smaller theaters such as Plays & Players who currently have 1,090 friends<sup>117</sup> and InterAct with 527 fans.<sup>118</sup> InterAct is also encouraging their audience members to let their friends know about the show through their own social media sites.<sup>119</sup>

In addition to Facebook, Plays & Players is using Twitter and YouTube.<sup>120</sup> Drexel is using Facebook and YouTube,<sup>121</sup> although there is no apparent

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<sup>113</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 11 June 2010. Notes, Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>114</sup> For more information on the purpose of each social media site please see Figure 1.

<sup>115</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>116</sup> "Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts' Facebook Page", [http://www.facebook.com/AnnenbergCenter?v=app\\_2344061033&ref=ts#!/AnnenbergCenter?v=wall&ref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/AnnenbergCenter?v=app_2344061033&ref=ts#!/AnnenbergCenter?v=wall&ref=ts) (accessed June 26, 2010).

<sup>117</sup> "Plays & Players' Facebook Page", <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/plays.players?ref=ts> (accessed June 26, 2010).

<sup>118</sup> "InterAct Theatre Company's Facebook Page", [http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Philadelphia-PA/InterAct-Theatre-Company/104819076737?ref=ts&ajaxpipe=1&\\_\\_a=22](http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Philadelphia-PA/InterAct-Theatre-Company/104819076737?ref=ts&ajaxpipe=1&__a=22) (accessed June 26, 2010).

<sup>119</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>120</sup> Student, Daniel. Interview by author, 7 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

Facebook page specific to Drexel's Theatre Program. Shakespeare in Clark Park and Simpatico also have Facebook pages, although each is relatively small: Shakespeare in Clark Park currently only has nine fans<sup>122</sup>, and Simpatico, only 187 fans<sup>123</sup>. However, according to Pratt, Facebook works well for Simpatico because all of the members have their own Facebook page, so not only can they invite Simpatico's Facebook members to their shows, but they can invite all of their individual friends as well.<sup>124</sup>

Ralph Weeks, however, is not crazy about the use of Facebook, (although Walnut Street Theatre has the most number of fans out of all of the companies listed at 1,645<sup>125</sup>) claiming the fact that the Kimmel Center being excited about their two thousandth member on Facebook is nothing because this is such a small number. He does not think organizations should make themselves insular by only marketing to the same people over and over again, and marketers need to focus on reaching large numbers of people and not on the "cool" things like Facebook and texting. Weeks admits that his audience is older and as a marketer he has to have a marketing plan that reaches his audience. He is not going to integrate texting into his plan if his audience is not texting. He insists that his market is not utilizing Facebook, but at the same time predicts that kids will run away from

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<sup>121</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>122</sup> "Shakespeare in Clark Park's Facebook Page", <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Shakespeare-in-Clark-Park/100400243338325?v=stream&ref=ts> (accessed June 26, 2010).

<sup>123</sup> "Simpatico Theatre Project's Facebook Page", <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/pages/Simpatico-Theatre-Project/275431890705?ref=ts> (accessed June 26, 2010).

<sup>124</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>125</sup> "Walnut Street Theatre's Facebook Page", <http://www.facebook.com/walnutstreettheatre?ref=ts&v=wall> (accessed June 26, 2010).

Facebook because there are all “old folks” on there. He also predicts that Facebook will soon be moot just like MySpace is.<sup>126</sup> Weeks seems to be doing the exact opposite of what Godin, author of *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable*, and others recommend as he reaches out to the masses. He also seems to be looking at the marketing efforts of other organizations with a very narrow eye by not considering what else they may be doing to supplement their marketing efforts outside of Facebook and other social media technologies. However, for his organization that is what seems to be working, because, as he claims, he has the “largest subscription base” in Philadelphia.<sup>127</sup>

Outside of social media sites, there are other online tactics that Philadelphia theaters are using and which their personnel perceive as word-of-mouth (although some of these are not considered as word-of-mouth techniques in other industries). BCKSEET uses online advertising as an example.<sup>128</sup> InterAct’s Golston has been using the company’s website to keep track of feedback from their audience:

One that we’ve been doing lately . . . is anytime we get comments sent to us, is actually posting them as if they were a review of the show. I have found that it bolsters what few reviews we do get. I have found that using other people’s words, just regular audience members, has really helped us have something to market later on in the run.<sup>129</sup>

Shakespeare in Clark Park does not make a huge effort to integrate word-of-mouth into their campaigns. The reasons for this is the production is usually only

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<sup>126</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s Archive.

<sup>127</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s Archive.

<sup>128</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>129</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.



five performances long, and there is an assumption that both word-of-mouth is going to happen naturally, and that the direct mailing will reach the patrons they need it to reach. Möller does however, use community websites and online event listings to promote the productions.<sup>130</sup> Simpatico is using Constant Contact (an online service that provides small businesses with tools for email marketing, surveys and event marketing) to email their newsletters, they are buying banner ads, and using the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia's listserve to promote their shows.<sup>131</sup> Walnut Street has 65,000 subscribers on their email list. The emails are used to build relationships. Weeks is making sure the subscribers to this email list are getting news they can not get anywhere else.<sup>132</sup>

Curtain speeches are also a popular way to encourage word-of-mouth. BCKSEET<sup>133</sup>, InterAct<sup>134</sup>, and Philadelphia Theatre Workshop<sup>135</sup> all try and persuade their audiences to spread the word during their curtain speech. InterAct goes as far as to let their audience know that word-of-mouth is their best form of marketing (whether electronically or in person).<sup>136</sup>

Drexel focuses most of their marketing efforts on campus, but when they do go off campus they try to create a buzz that excites the students working on the

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<sup>130</sup> Möller, Maria. Interview by author, 2 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive

<sup>131</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>132</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive.

<sup>133</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>134</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>135</sup> Felty, Bill. Interview by author, 10 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>136</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

campaign. The hope is that they will then go back and tell their friends about what they got to do to promote that particular show. According to Nick Anselmo:

We do a lot of guerrilla events, but I also think the payoff from doing an event down at First Friday is really gathering a group of 20 students and having them hand out postcards. That excitement is a bigger payoff than giving a postcard to all of those people at first Friday and having anyone come, which is probably unrealistic.<sup>137</sup>

Some of the guerrilla marketing Anselmo has had his students participate in involved themed handouts. They created magnets to throw against metal objects during First Friday for New Paradise Laboratories' production of *Prom*. For *Red Herring* they handed out bags of Swedish Fish with information about the show on the bags, and they launched a similar effort for EgoPo's production of *Bluebird* where they handed out blue marshmallow Peeps.<sup>138</sup> Such techniques have not caught on with every Philadelphia company that has tried them. When Simpatico attempted some guerrilla marketing, which was defined by Pratt as handing out postcards on the street, they found it to be unsuccessful and have not tried it since.<sup>139</sup>

BCKSEET advertises a five-dollar discount on their postcards for regular priced tickets.<sup>140</sup> They hand the postcards out to audience members at the end of every show.<sup>141</sup> Plays & Players hand out their postcards at happy hours they hold at public bars. They had one event where if an individual purchased a ticket right

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<sup>137</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>138</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>139</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>140</sup> DeCandia, Greg. 30 June 2010. Facebook message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive

<sup>141</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

there on the spot, Plays & Players bought them a drink.<sup>142</sup> Philadelphia Theatre Workshop depends on the playwright to provide the theater with a contact list including email addresses, which can include their friends, family, colleagues and names they may have obtained by working with other theaters.<sup>143</sup> In addition cast and crew are expected to spread word-of-mouth using their own contacts.<sup>144</sup>

According to both Golston and Weeks, reviews are a form of word-of-mouth that cannot be planned for.<sup>145</sup> Golston keeps this in mind when planning his controlled word-of-mouth efforts:

The word-of-mouth we try to create, we try to create before the show is even open, in part because we don't always know how the play is going to be onstage, and because we can't rely on reviews, because the reviews of our shows tend to criticize us for the kind of theater that we are doing in some way or another. We can't assume that we are going to be able to use them to promote the show. So the community partnership idea was sort of born out of that idea. If we got the community that is working on the issues of the play talking ahead of time then it wouldn't need to rely so much on the fact that someone came to see the show and told their friends.<sup>146</sup>

Weeks, at Walnut Street Theatre, does depend on the press to create forms of word-of-mouth beside reviews. During his campaign for *Oliver!* in 2009, Weeks partnered with Fox 29 news and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* to promote open auditions for up to 36 slots for boys and girls ages 6-13. Not only did these children have a chance to be on stage (not to mention a chance for their family to see them on stage), but a select few finalist would also be featured on Good Day

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<sup>142</sup> Student, Daniel. Interview by author, 7 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>143</sup> Felty, Bill. 26 June 2010. E-mail message to author. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>144</sup> Felty, Bill. Interview by author, 10 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>145</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive.

<sup>146</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

Philadelphia, a local morning program on the Fox network.<sup>147</sup> This created buzz that reached the masses. Not only was it made public through the press, but it also got the parents and grandparents of the children who were auditioning talking about the show. Weeks used similar PR to get word-of-mouth going when Walnut Street was casting for the dog in *Oliver!*.<sup>148</sup>

Loyal subscribers can also be an asset to word-of-mouth marketing. Weeks depends on the loyalty of his subscribers to spread word-of-mouth about Walnut Street. Since they offer cheaper rates during previews, and their shows run seven or eight weeks, their audience has more of an opportunity to create a buzz early on than theaters that have three or four week runs.<sup>149</sup>

There have been, among the companies I interviewed, some unsuccessful attempts at word-of-mouth campaigns as well. One must remember that an unsuccessful campaign is not necessarily a total failure since it gives the organizations a chance to learn from their marketing mistakes. BCKSEET attempted to host a blogger night where bloggers were contacted and encouraged to come and see a performance on a particular night. BCKSEET then outfitted their lobby for the bloggers so it would be accommodating for them to blog either during intermission or immediately following the performance. Unfortunately,

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<sup>147</sup> Walnut Street Theatre. "News: Fox 29, The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Walnut invite you to 'Consider Yourself One of Us!'" Walnut Street Theatre. <http://www.walnutstreettheatre.org/news/index.php?id=133> (accessed January 20, 2010).

<sup>148</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive.

<sup>149</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive.

they did not get any bloggers to attend this particular performance.<sup>150</sup>

During InterAct's production of *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* they wanted to have audience members come up on stage and take pictures with the cast after the performance. The idea was that the audience members could then immediately email or text their friends, family members, and co-workers the pictures right there on the spot and tell them which show they were attending. A show about professional wrestling would surely be a great opportunity for this word-of-mouth campaign, but unfortunately the cast did not want to stay that long after the performance so the campaign did not work out as planned.<sup>151</sup>

## II. WHY THESE TECHNIQUES ARE IMPORTANT

It is important to know which techniques Philadelphia theaters are using in their campaigns. This helps to determine if they are defining word-of-mouth properly, if they are up to par with what other industries are utilizing, and if they are using any unique techniques. It is equally important to know why Philadelphia theater companies are using these techniques to help understand their importance to them, and to see how they fit into the grand scheme of the organizations' marketing plans.

A couple of theaters acknowledged that they integrated word-of-mouth into their marketing mix because that is how a majority of their audiences are

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<sup>150</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>151</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive

hearing about their shows. This is true for Philadelphia Theatre Workshop<sup>152</sup> and for Annenberg.<sup>153</sup> Word-of-mouth also becomes a necessity when previously used marketing tools and resources are no longer available to organizations.

BCKSEET also does this but for different reasons. They are motivated to use word-of-mouth techniques because of what DeCandia calls the “death of print media”. He explained, “[The] Internet seems to be the only place to advertise and get things to people in a quick and large fashion. ... [You have to] find new ways to communicate to the audience and have them extend the invite.”<sup>154</sup>

Anselmo is using word-of-mouth marketing to raise the awareness of his students.<sup>155</sup> Weeks is using it to secure repeat buyers from season to season.<sup>156</sup> Golston uses word-of-mouth to raise the awareness of his audience before the performances begin and to keep his marketing budget down towards the end of the production:

For us word-of-mouth is very, very important. As a matter of fact it may be a little bit more important for us than a lot of theaters because typically the shows that we do are world premieres or second or third productions. So very rarely do we do a show that is known. We occasionally might have a playwright that's known, or some other aspect that we can sell about the production, but we don't usually have a marquee name with any particular play. So word of mouth is particularly important for us because only after someone has seen the show can they talk about. We rely very heavily on word of mouth. In part because the kind of shows, but also budget limitations force us to. ... you can put a lot of money up front, and

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<sup>152</sup> Felty, Bill. Interview by author, 10 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>153</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>154</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>155</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>156</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive.

... between the reviews and word-of-mouth...the show will take off and sustain itself over time. So you are running far fewer and smaller ads at the end then you are at the beginning.

That's the ... thing about word-of-mouth techniques, is that often we have to sort of gear them towards selling the theater rather than the show because they haven't see the show yet. Our subscribers, in particular, are pretty loyal to us. They like the kind of work that we do even though they might not like every single show. They do tend to sell the organization pretty well for us because they like what they've seen before. They like what we're doing to build awareness in the community. Those kind of things, ticket or subscription discounts, work up front. Even though they haven't seen the show yet, they are still telling people about us. It is having someone tell someone about the theater rather than the show.

One thing that we have been doing pretty successfully and for quite some time is to reach out to organizations that are working on the causes that are related to the issues of the play. In a way it is word-of-mouth, because we are hoping that they will spread the word about the play and, sort of, endorse it in a way even though they haven't seen the show yet. Sometimes, they have read the script, and sometimes they have not. We sort of reach out to the people that are leading the cause in the community with the hopes that that will filter down to other people. It is word-of-mouth, again, without having seen the show, but the same principle at work.<sup>157</sup>

Golston's techniques, employed on behalf of InterAct, are probably the smartest He is working on branding his organization rather than always having to wait to implement a marketing campaign until after each show is picked, the actors cast, the press shots taken, etc. He promises InterAct audiences a quality experience no matter what the show or subject matter, and according to him, this has worked rather effectively for the organization.

Plays & Players<sup>158</sup> and Simpatico<sup>159</sup> cited word-of-mouth as being a priority, because it is free. Pratt added that it is an easy way to quickly reach a lot

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<sup>157</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive

<sup>158</sup> Student, Daniel. Interview by author, 7 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

of people - especially when it comes to the use of Facebook. Since Simpatico will already have an image and a show blurb all they need to do is post these on Facebook and send the invites out.<sup>160</sup>

Just as finding ways to be remarkable must be a priority when developing programming, word-of-mouth must be a priority when developing a marketing plan. Theaters need to listen to how their audiences are hearing - and want to hear about - the productions. They need to make sure those are the techniques they employ to reach out to their audiences. Theaters need to consciously define which marketing efforts are considered word-of-mouth. Is online advertising really a form of word-of-mouth, or simply an alternative way to do conventional advertising? Is it not true that an electronic newsletter would only be considered word-of-mouth if it went viral? After the theaters categorize which techniques are word-of-mouth they need to keep standard techniques in their plan (such as Facebook and mentions in the curtain speech), but also come up with creative alternatives (such as themed happy hours and referral programs). If theaters do not find out how their audiences want to be communicated to and then communicate to them that way, they stand little chance of widening and deepening their audience base.

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<sup>159</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>160</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.



### CHAPTER THREE – THE TRACKING AND EFFECTIVENESS OF WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING TECHNIQUES

In Chapter Two I established that most of the theater companies interviewed for this paper are consciously using word-of-mouth efforts when planning their marketing campaigns. There is no way to tell if marketing efforts are working without tracking them. And yet, as Cook said in her interview:

I think word of mouth is an untapped resource and its something that a lot of people can get really stuck on. We can track the direct mail so we do the direct mailings, and we can track the emails so we do that. I think word of mouth is something that is intangible and it is kind of hard to track although I think some of the social media devises make it a little bit easier.<sup>161</sup>

So how are theaters tracking their word-of-mouth efforts? Are they tracking them at all?

Annenberg, BCKSEET<sup>162</sup>, InterAct, Philadelphia Theatre Workshop<sup>163</sup>, Simpatico<sup>164</sup>, and Walnut Street<sup>165</sup> are all asking their patrons how they heard

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<sup>161</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>162</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>163</sup> Felty, Bill. Interview by author, 10 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>164</sup> Pratt, Jennifer. Interview by author, 16 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>165</sup> Weeks, Ralph. Interview by author, 15 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's Archive.

about the show when they buy tickets either online, in person, or both. Cook explains, “One of the ways we track word-of-mouth is when people call in to order a ticket we have a list of six ways they could have heard of it. We train the box office to always ask, “How did you hear about this?” That’s a way that we track it.”<sup>166</sup> Golston explains, “We ask all of our buyers how they heard about the show. We do that all the time, and then I actually follow-up. That’s one of the few tracking devices that we use that I really do watch on a fairly regular basis. I check it [the responses] probably every week or so during the run of a show.”<sup>167</sup>

Another way that word-of-mouth is being tracked is through the use of audience surveys. This is something Annenberg and BCKSEET<sup>168</sup> are utilizing. Cook explains:

We are just sending out a survey to our students who attended this big student event a couple of weeks ago, and we are asking them about how they found out about it. Word-of-mouth is one of those and I am sure it will be the highest thing that registers.”<sup>169</sup>

Cook makes sure she is tracking the results from any referral programs she is running as well:

We will ... say, OK who are all the people who took advantage of the refer-a-friend free ticket. We’ll pull them all, we’ll send them ... an offer to become a subscriber for the rest of the season at a discounted price. Then we’ll send it out, and then we’ll give it some time to work, and then we will come back a month later and we’ll say, OK, how many people

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<sup>166</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>167</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>168</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

<sup>169</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author’s archive.

actually took advantage of it. Those kinds of efforts are not hard to track.<sup>170</sup>

Drexel, Plays & Players, and Shakespeare in Clark Park<sup>171</sup> are not formally tracking their word-of-mouth marketing efforts. Anselmo from Drexel's Theater Program states:

We haven't been really good at tracking stuff. It is hard to say if those events really work. People seem aware. We have done a lot of interesting marketing, and I have found that we do seem to have recognition on campus, but I think it is just consistency. I think that one of the other challenges of the theater department is that the theater isn't used for theater. It is used for any number of things. The Late Night Series is there every Thursday and now I would say 70 percent of the campus is aware that there's this thing that goes on in the lobby of that space every Thursday night. It's that consistency that is really great.<sup>172</sup>

Anselmo explained his reason for this:

It [tracking marketing techniques] is not a priority. That's not why we [Drexel's Theater Program] are here. We are here to give them [the students] an educational experience. The priority still has to have it be a learning experience and a fun one. It's [Drexel's Theater Program] extracurricular.<sup>173</sup>

Plays & Players has tracked their efforts more informally through internal conversations. According to Student their marketing really "is not a numbers game at this point."<sup>174</sup> It seems that while it is important for them to market, it is more important for them to produce their programs.

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<sup>170</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>171</sup> Möller, Maria. Interview by author, 2 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive

<sup>172</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>173</sup> Anselmo, Nick. Interview by author, 3 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>174</sup> Student, Daniel. Interview by author, 7 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

For the most part those that are tracking their word-of-mouth efforts are receiving the expected results. Cook has a theory as to why word-of-mouth is so powerful:

Most people say word-of-mouth. ... They might see a poster somewhere, and they might get a postcard in the mail, but the thing that actually makes them go buy a ticket is that friend that told them. Or maybe they don't even realize they saw that ad in the paper because it was two weeks before a friend said something, and that's what they remember. People remember if somebody told them a lot more than if they saw an ad in the paper.<sup>175</sup>

What is important to remember is that information for a production or event should be marketed in many different ways to reach many different audiences, and act as a constant reminder, but word-of-mouth is going to be the tactic that is usually the most likely to sell the production or event to a patron.

InterAct, BCKSEET<sup>176</sup> and Philadelphia Theatre Workshop<sup>177</sup> are getting a large portion of their patrons through word-of-mouth. According to Golston of InterAct, "Our postcard is the number one response and word-of-mouth is second. Both of those are head and shoulders above everything else, and that includes advertising and reviews. Word-of-mouth comes very closely behind our postcard and then everything is way, way, far behind."<sup>178</sup> Although word-of-mouth ranks high on the list of ways patrons have heard about InterAct, this is not always something Golston expects:

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<sup>175</sup> Cook, Nicole. Interview by author, 8 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>176</sup> DeCandia, Gregory G. Interview by author, 18 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>177</sup> Felty, Bill. Interview by author, 10 December 2009. Notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

<sup>178</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive.

It really depends on the play. It also depends on the climate. Right now we're kind of worried about the rest of our season. The rest of our season is pretty dark and heavy as opposed to *Chad Deity*, which was light and sort of spectacle driven. That was definitely a play that you run out and tell your friends about. That's a play not to be missed. And we knew that going into it. We knew even just from the reading of the script. This is the play that you are going to want to tell your friends about. It was so different. ... At the same time we can't always effect the way people are going to receive the show. Yes, the results are sort of what we expect at the same time there are factors that we can't always have control over. And that's true of every theater. I think in our case it is sometimes worse because the plays are new.<sup>179</sup>

Although tracking word-of-mouth can seem like a daunting task it does not have to be. It can be as informal as asking audience members how they heard about a show when they arrive at the box office. As organizations grow and become more sophisticated they can systemize their efforts more formally through the use of surveys and referral program redemptions. Tracking systems do not need to be expensive or particularly time consuming especially with the use of free or cheap online survey sites like SurveyMethods.com and SurveyMonkey.com. Tracking marketing efforts should always be a priority otherwise there is no way to tell if money and time are being put to good use. Even Drexel's Theater Program should consider tracking their efforts for educational purposes. It may be satisfying to show students that their marketing efforts paid off.

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<sup>179</sup> Golston, David. Interview by author, 1 December 2009. Digital recording and notes. Philadelphia, PA. Author's archive

## CONCLUSION

The Philadelphia theater companies interviewed for this paper all believe there is some aspect of their organization that makes them remarkable and worth talking about. Unfortunately, they either do not understand what it means to be remarkable, or in fact, do not stand out in their field as much as they think they do. Each company is executing varying methods of word-of-mouth marketing techniques with varying levels of expertise and consistency in their campaigns. A few, however, (Drexel Theatre Program, Plays & Players and Shakespeare in Clark Park), are not tracking their efforts simply because of time, resources, and other priorities.

The research on for-profit organizations has shown that in order for word-of-mouth to be generated, the organization must first create a product or service that is remarkable. The product or service must stand out from its competitors. Once this is accomplished, spreading word-of-mouth is easy as long as the organization is paying careful attention to the way their consumers want to hear about their product or service. The various methods that are relevant today include online tools such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs. Organizations can also engage and trust the people that are already their biggest fans to help them spread word-of-mouth. This can also include the use of referral programs. Organizations must also remember to track their results, because

without tracking there is no way to determine which techniques are working and which are not.

The Philadelphia theaters I studied are on the right track, but are not currently up to pace with the for-profit world. While the many representatives of these companies that I interviewed believe their organization is remarkable, this is often not the case: in most instances there are other companies in Philadelphia providing the same or similar services to the public. Some of the companies I studied are integrating word-of-mouth into their marketing campaigns at full force because they know the importance of this tool. Others are having a hard time defining what a word-of-mouth marketing technique is and are integrating small efforts such as Facebook. Still others are not putting any effort into this at all, because they will assume it will happen naturally. When it comes to tracking their results, Philadelphia theaters seem to face challenges. Some are able to track efforts easily with the use of surveys, referral programs and inquiries at the box office, while others are claiming time and other priorities are keeping them from tracking their word-of-mouth marketing efforts.

Moving forward, some Philadelphia theaters may need to take into consideration what their competitors are doing and then redefine what makes them remarkable. They also need to be educated on what word-of-mouth techniques are available to them, how they can use them to their advantage, the benefits of tracking their efforts, and which tracking options would best fit their organization based on time and budgetary limitations. Once these theaters know

what their options are and realize how important it is to utilize them, they can begin to harness the most powerful marketing tool available to them.



## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### MISSION STATEMENTS

**Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts** - The Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts of the University of Pennsylvania is a major cultural destination and crossroads in the performing arts, connecting Philadelphia regional audiences and the University of Pennsylvania through exposure to innovative human expression in theatre, music and dance.

The Annenberg Center highlights the value of the performing arts by presenting world renowned and emerging artists and companies who express adventuresome perspectives on contemporary issues, timeless ideas, and diverse cultures. By offering contextualization programs, featuring Penn faculty as well as experts from the artistic and business communities, the Annenberg Center promotes critical thinking among its audiences, creating uniquely rewarding arts experiences.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, "Mission and History," Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. <http://www.pennpresents.org/about/mission.php> (accessed May 12, 2010).

**BCKSEET Productions** - To produce art with the talents of multidisciplinary artists who educate, entertain and enlighten society with the ideals of classical, contemporary, and original cutting edge works of art.<sup>181</sup>

**Drexel University's Department of Performing Arts (The entity housing the Theatre Department)** - The mission of the Department of Performing Arts is twofold. We exist to enhance the cultural literacy of all Drexel students by providing them with opportunities to study, create, perform and experience dance, music, and theater. Equally important, we prepare students to succeed in the music and arts industries by integrating dynamic curriculum with real-world cooperative education experiences.<sup>182</sup>

**InterAct Theatre Company** - InterAct is a theatre for today's world, producing new and contemporary plays that explore the social, political, and cultural issues of our time.

Founded in 1988, InterAct's aim is to educate, as well as entertain its audiences, by producing world-class, thought-provoking productions, and by using theatre as a tool to foster positive social change in the school, the workplace and the community. Through its artistic and educational programs, InterAct seeks to make a significant contribution to the cultural life of Philadelphia and to the

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<sup>181</sup> BCKSEET Productions, "About," BCKSEET Productions.  
<http://www.wix.com/BCKSEET/newbck> (accessed May 12, 2010).

<sup>182</sup> Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design, "Performing Arts," Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts & Design.  
<http://drexel.edu/westphal/academics/undergraduate/performingarts/> (accessed May 12, 2010).

American theatre.

InterAct strives to cultivate new voices for the theatre. The company believes in developing and producing important new plays that represent our time and place, and introducing new writers to local audiences.

InterAct strives to produce plays that explore issues of social, cultural and political relevance. InterAct uses the unique power and magic of the theatre to ask difficult questions about the world we live in, examining the forces that influence what we believe and why. InterAct dares to dramatize complex and controversial issues with artistic integrity and fairness.

InterAct strives to be socially responsible and actively involved in its community. Utilizing the interactive power of live performance and dramatic role-playing, InterAct seeks to cultivate tolerance and understanding, promote cultural diversity, and improve the human relations in its community.<sup>183</sup>

**Philadelphia Theatre Workshop** - Philadelphia Theatre Workshop strives to nurture bright and emerging artists at various stages of their careers. We ignite Philadelphia by spotlighting characters and stories often underrepresented in the broader theatrical world. We are dedicated to reflecting diverse audiences through original, evocative programming. Our focus is world premiere plays by Philadelphia-area playwrights. Philadelphia Theatre Workshop: Making better artists and audiences.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> InterAct Theatre Company. "About InterAct . . . Mission," InterAct Theatre Company. <http://www.interacttheatre.org/interact-mission.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>184</sup> Philadelphia Theatre Workshop. "About us," Philadelphia Theatre Workshop. <http://www.philadelphiatheatreworkshop.org/aboutus.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

**Plays & Players** - Plays & Players is dedicated to engaging and involving the local community in professional quality theatre and other performing arts. We accomplish our mission by producing a season of new and classic theatrical productions with local artists, crafting collaborative opportunities with other performing arts companies to use our own Plays & Players Theater, and offering family focused presentation and educational programs.<sup>185</sup>

**Shakespeare in Clark Park** - Shakespeare in Clark Park is a theatre company committed to presenting free, outdoor productions of Shakespeare's plays, creating a cultural event accessible to the Clark Park neighborhood and the greater Philadelphia area. While engaging the community and expanding Philadelphia's summertime cultural scene, Shakespeare in Clark Park re-imagines the world of the park through the works of Shakespeare.<sup>186</sup>

**Simpatico Theatre Project** - Simpatico Theatre Project believes theatre to be a force for positive social change. We produce classic, contemporary, and new theatre that encourages dialogue about the problems concerning the Philadelphia community. Through educational partnerships with local organizations and advocacy groups we connect our audience to those individuals and groups that also seek solutions.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia. "Plays and Players," Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia. <http://www.theatrealliance.org/member/plays-and-players> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>186</sup> Shakespeare in Clark Park, "About SCP," Shakespeare in Clark Park. <http://shakespeareinclarkpark.org/about/index.html> (accessed June 27, 2010).

<sup>187</sup> Simpatico Theatre Project, "Mission," Simpatico Theatre Project. <http://simpaticotheatre.org/landing/company/mission/> (accessed June 27, 2010).

**Walnut Street Theatre** - The mission of Walnut Street Theatre Company is to sustain the tradition of professional theatre and contribute to its future viability and vitality.

It does so through:

- the production and presentation of professional theatre;
- the encouragement, training and development of artists;
- the cultivation of diverse audiences and the preservation and chronicling of its theatre building, a national historic landmark.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Walnut Street Theatre. "Mission Statement" Walnut Street Theatre.  
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